

## THE RAPE THREAT SCENE IN NARRATIVE CINEMA

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Introductory screening of video clip showing three film sequences:

- \* the opening of *TRULY MADLY DEEPLY*, with a woman coming out of a London tube station at night and walking down a deserted residential street;
- \* an adolescent woman being suspended from a ceiling in bondage and threatened by villains, from *CODE OF HONOR*;
- \* a woman violently attacked in her home by a man masquerading as a police detective, from *THE ROOKIE*.

\* Other films I might show scenes from, to demonstrate the theme of race:  
*YEAR OF THE DRAGON*, *THE DEEP*, *BLUE STEEL*

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The scenes you have just looked at are so common, so generic, that for many of you their "teachability" becomes obvious just as you watch the scenes edited together this way. They are representative moments with which we all are familiar. Yet the *generic* nature of such moments is rarely taught, that is, their commonness as a narrative structuring device.

As I define the rape threat scene, it runs the gamut from the stalking scene, to rape threat, to bondage and imprisonment, to the violent murder of women. Its characteristics are misogyny and a spectatorial frisson, in which the spectator feels the threat in an eroticized way. The scene has a play of force and consent. It depicts threat, forced sex, or murder to which the female character does not consent but to which the audience does consent.

For any social group, violent threat is a way to establish its members' fixed identity (especially that of its less powerful members) and to impose a behavioral code. The warning is, "Stay in your place." Violent threat also establishes a mental construct, a location in representation. In terms of psychic identity, this location in representation is fantasized both by oneself and by others.

For a woman, rape threat is an admonition. It warns her about the relation between gender roles, public and private space--especially in the city, dress

codes, and safety. These aspects of daily life are all coded, and for a woman in one way or another these social codes are reinforced by the commonness of rape. Rape threat exists in every woman's consciousness. For example, if I hear footsteps behind me and a shadow crosses mine, I turn around quickly, thinking about rape. As part of women's consciousness, rape remains in the mental background where certain cues make it jump quickly into the foreground to signal threat.

In the rape threat scene in cinema, the threat against the body of a woman, against her sexuality, is the inverse of woman's rage for her subordinate sexual and social position. Such rage is taboo to enact openly or even to represent, especially in its mudanity and commonness, so its inverse is constantly depicted in a highly eroticized special moment.

Many women have rape fantasies as part of their mental process of pleasurable representing sexuality to themselves. These fantasies have to be distinguished both from the cinematic rape threat scene and the social reality of rape. What characterizes the rape fantasy is the masochist's pleasure in, control over, and prolonged staging of the imagined scene. Such fantasies stand in stark contrast to real rape, with its loss of control and erasure of identity.

The cinematic rape threat scene derives in part from ordinary male privilege to stalk. Man can stalk women, especially with a car in a city, making comments. This privilege is limited by a man's race and class in terms of the neighborhood stalked. Men can stalk a room with their eyes, openly picking out the object of their desire. Narratively, in cinema, male protagonists are the most common subjects of social acts, mobile and active, penetrating space, and in control of the glance.

That particular kind of male sadism which characterizes the psychology of rape is, "I do it because I can"--the thrill of that act of power. This kind of sadism is marked by the need actually to destroy personhood. The rapist destroys the other's social reality and her ego in favor of establishing his authority. And as Freud indicated in "A Child Is Being Beaten," women fantasize about violent threat scenarios from inside the scenario or as spectators at close range. The male's relation to such fantasies is to see one's self as outside the action, with a strong element of disavowal.

The social authorization and coding of a legitimate sadism has a relation to the existence of rape. That legitimized sadism, bloodletting, and unleashing of rage is the right to kill and the military's encouraging of a strong *desire* to kill. Susan Brownmiller demonstrates how rape has historically been one of the spoils of war, an implicit promise to soldiers and a common humiliation

inflicted upon a subjugated (female) population. From the point of view of the subjugated, the license and power to kill is curative. Frantz Fanon postulated that picking up the gun and killing the oppressor was the cure for socially induced masochism, the cure for the colonized mind. Since the armies use women mainly in non-combat positions and since many women philosophically eschew returning violence for violence, socially legitimized bloodlust can be read cross-culturally and transhistorically as a gender-assigned role.

To return to Freud's notion about the kind of male disavowal at work in fantasies about violent threat, I would add another kind of disavowal. Dennis Giles mentioned it while discussing potential spectatorial positions for male consumers of pornography. The deep structure of the rape threat scene, under its surface story of adult genital intercourse, offers another kind of spectatorial pleasure. It re-presents an aspect of infantile aggression and rage, the dismembering and devouring of the mother's body in an effort at joining and fusion. For the male spectator, this dismembering-on-the-way-to-fusion may have as its object the remembered maternal body and also the man's own female aspect. The femininity of the male viewer is also something both represented and disavowed in the rape threat scene as he feels the frisson of attack against someone who is by her gender safely "not me."

In *Wit and the Unconscious*, Freud analyzed the structure of smut, specifically from the point of view of the man narrating a sexual incident. Freud said that for the story teller, when that man's libidinous impulse confronts a hindrance, it becomes distinctively hostile and cruel. The libido, I would say the man's libido, then utilizes the sadistic components of the sexual impulse against the hindrance. For Freud, the hindrance as he saw it was the unyieldingness of the woman. A smutty story would function to pull the woman into a sexual narration, if only by forcing her to listen to it. In a face to face encounter, this sexualization works most effectively if witnessed by a third person who acts neutral.

In cinema, this mechanism functions well because of the apparent neutrality of the "third person" aspect of film narration. Everyone seeing a rape threat scene--like listening to a smutty story--thinks of genitalia and the sexual act. Shame in listening to smut or a reaction of fear or embarrassment in seeing a rape threat scene means that the female spectator is reacting with excitement. The scene denudes the woman on screen and the female spectator. It enlists all viewers in the sexual scenario. This kind of spectatorial frisson also occurs when watching/hearing news about sexual violence and rape--from news stories of Jack the Ripper in the last century

to stories about the concentration camp in Europe in the 40s to television and radio coverage of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings.

Furthermore, again drawing on Freud's *Wit and the Unconscious*, much of which can be applied to art, the mechanisms of displacement and condensation allow there to be a surface story, which keeps people from having to recognize or undo resistances. The surface story can either liberate pleasure from its repressed sources or it can put itself directly at the service of the repressed tendencies. In this sense, high culture hides direct expressions of cynicism or of taking pleasure directly from pain. But in fact, that is what the rape threat scene in narrative cinema does. It is acutely cynical about women and rape, and it provides pleasure from women's sexual pain. The third person validates enlisting everyone into the smutty story. In film, it is the objectivity of the flow of the realist narrative, moving in a character-centered way toward the climax, that does the same thing. To demonstrate this mechanism, I will talk about some common narrative structures in film and how they contribute to the rape threat scene's effectiveness.

If central characters are usually men of action, then hero/villain becomes a needed division of traits. The hero has a unitary, recognizable, social/sexual identity and consciousness. Within his consciousness, he often has the kinds of problems a romantic hero or anti-hero might have (e.g., paralyzing indecision). The villain can be deviant, and is often a person of color or a foreigner. This person is transgressively amoral or immoral. Both villain and hero have causal agency. The hero has the duty and the right to enact social and private morality and is marked as a character by his separateness and distinctiveness. Even in his appearance he has an uniqueness and is not filmed to bring out the timeless, universalized beauty elicited by close-ups of the heroines.

In contrast to male agency, female characterization and feminine, domestic space in narrative cinema are more of a locus, a boundary, a site, a territory. The body of a woman is the site of a morality play--about family or about being a moral refuge, especially for the man. Because the female body and domestic space take on this metaphoric meaning, that is one of reasons they so often have to be violated and defended in film. What is disavowed in this common metaphorical association of woman's body and home is women's responsibility for childrearing and domestic labor and the emotional process whereby women, especially in their bodies, become the object of male power plays and male rage. Disavowed, too, are the most ordinary social manifestations of sexual harassment, such as the office masher or even more common, the constant intrusion of women's personal space.

Within film narratives, the rape threat sequences often seem strangely discontinuous. After the threat occurs, as the narrative gains force moving toward its climax, the woman saved from rape seems miraculously to recover. Most significantly disavowed in the common use of the rape threat scene is the reality that a woman faces after sexual aggression, including the repetition of the traumatic moment over and over in her conscious mind and in her dreams and unconscious reactions to daily life.

Not only are people of color most often visible in film narratives as villains or props, the film rape of women of color denies these women an individualized fate. Black women raped in slavery, Mexican women raped by *coyotes* leading them across the U.S. border, and Vietnamese women raped as the spoils of war--these women become metaphors for "larger" social calamities. The spectacle of their pain does not dish up the same spectatorial frisson that sexual threat to a white woman does.

The rape threat scene, in its narrative function, is not ironic. It provides a straightforward anticipation of pain, of the punishment of a woman. It is naturalized by the narrative structure. The rape threat scene functions to "explain" the narrative conclusion. It guarantees that the major conflicts are intensely developed at this point. It makes the scene totally sincere (vs. "spatter" films, at which the adolescent audience laughs). Viewers pay little attention is paid to the acting and performance of the villain or woman, just to the tension and threat.

In the rape threat sequence the pursuit is all. As Gaylyn Studlar explained this kind of narrative mechanism in film, the scene offers viewers a frozen moment. In some ways it is a romantic moment, poised at the edge of tension. It is a moment of suspension, waiting, repetition, fragmentation, pathos, and objectification. It is often shot like the death of the rabbit in the hunt sequence in *Rules of the Game*. Furthermore, the scene provides a ritual, something constantly and predictably evoked, symbolized, epitomized, and selected as a moment of cultural importance. As Studlar describes a frozen moment of suspense, images hang in the air like *tableaux vivantes*. In this case, there may be the actual suspension of a body; certainly we often see a body of a woman in bondage. A knife may be poised at her throat; the interior space frozen, fixing the woman in her space. There is a concentration on the details of the imprisonment and suffering, a fragmentation, and a representation through concrete, small details. There is also a disruption of temporality and the time sense. Directorially, the scene isolates the rhythmic pulsations of the threat's narrative movement with gesture shots or expressive use of the mise-en-scene. the formal treatment breaks up the sensual moments into its parts. The whole sequence functions like the fort/da game where the future is make present in the anticipation of

punishment and loss. Repetition and a kind of slowing down freeze, for a moment, the syntagmatic rush of the narrative. In *CODE OF SILENCE*, the rush of the final chase sequence is interrupted by periodic shots of the young woman in bondage suspended from the ceiling, the audience anticipating what will happen to her should Chuck Norris fail.

Similar to the way Freud analyzed the meaning of fantasies and dreams, Gaylyn Studlar and, elsewhere, Janet Bergstrom discuss how film scenes establish the possibility for multiple spectator positions. As the rape threat scene is placed in the narrative, it sets out a map of desire, an order of events, a site of enactment, and a delineation of actor/acted upon. As a trope within film narrative, the scene has a history which demands a certain set of predictable structures of response. It imagery make a direct erotic connection to the spectator so that it establishes a libidinalized, eroticized moment of viewer positioning. This is hard to escape. However, elements of the scene often become realigned in the spectatorial viewing/fantasy/thrill process. I wish to consider some possibilities for spectator positioning and consequent play of identities.

Both male and female viewers must submit to this scene and its narrative function. It is similar to submitting to the social and psychic rule of heterosexuality. The scene is a condensed emblem of that submitting. That the surface story is about rape as the rule of force indicates the relation of social force and psychic violence to heterosexuality as an institution.

In terms of spectator positions provided for men, it is important that male characters be demarcated between hero and villain, especially in the rape threat sequence. Villainy guarantees spectatorial disavowal and distance; it masks the guilt that might otherwise accompany the frisson (no man I know admits to being a rapist). The scene often depicts the desire to protect wife and daughter, yet it also always shows how woman's space must be circumscribed. The scene gives permission to kill the rapist. This is very important. It validates the structure and pleasure of pater familias, and as I mentioned earlier, such validation lies behind the military, patriarchal permission to kill. The scene also lets men experience the female position while guaranteeing that they are not female. In the frisson, male spectators can both rape and be raped, dissolving into the flux, into a masochistic desire for dissolution into and union with the woman, in intercourse, or with larger figures of the female, the mother. Meanwhile, in the surface story, not only is this spectatorial position disavowed, but the female is obligatorily and satisfactorily punished.

For the female spectator watching the scene, she may have a sense of doubling, of being both in and outside the scene. The scene may provide a

sense of mastery of being able to watch aggression against the female body from a controlled distance. In the narrativized terror, sometimes the woman character is saved; sometimes the female viewer's identification shifts over to that of the hero, who moves on to conquer. The scene always makes the female spectator not only into fear the harm but also expect it, the expectation accompanied by suspense and thrill. The female viewer's genitalia become invested with the frisson of threat. The scene provides a cruel fantasy which makes the woman spectator consume female objectification and so eat her own flesh. The female spectator will probably also feel anger at this spectacle of threat and humiliation. The scene lets her feel the force of that anger by letting her participate in male bloodlust which only in spectatorship can become her own bloodlust since socially it is not a permissible emotion for her to claim. There is aspect of ideology, as Marx explains, by which issues which the dominant culture disavows or represses find social expression as their inverse [e.g., the welfare queen, the pervert, the terrorist]. In this case, the commonness of the rape threat sequence indicates the commonness of hostility against women but it also contains within it, in its inverse which is both alluded to and disavowed, a powerful effort to contain that most common unexpressed emotion, women's rage.

The rape threat sequence is so common that female consumers of the media can hardly avoid it. And they have not risen up in protest against it since it is so naturalized. The rape threat sequence places women into multiple positions of identification and also into a movement of identifications. During a film viewing, this movement of identifications, often ambivalent, can be successive and/or simultaneous. Furthermore, women may react differently at different moments in their life histories.

To summarize, below the surface structure of the rape threat narrative, spectatorial positions can alternate between binary poles--active/passive, masculine/feminine, aggression and victimization or submission. For women especially, there is a movement back and forth between outside and inside, receiving and penetration. The rape threat sequence is emblematic of heterosexuality because it enacts a violent dance of spectatorial viewing positions at the boundaries of the female body. The rape threat is about limits and liminalities. It shows the border states. Its dance embraces pleasure, pain, threat, safety, murder, rescue, thrill, participation, warning, and prohibition.

The female body is available for common narrative pleasures. The rape threat scene sexualizes the world of women, intruded upon by the world of men. It is about women's availability, stated to the extreme. It functions like a puritan preacher's fire and brimstone sermon, using the pleasure and pain of the frisson to teach a core structure by which we live.

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The major essay of which this is a part will include three sections: this one, another one on race and sexual violence in narrative cinema, and a section on feminist film/video that depicts the reality of sexual violence to women, its psychological dimensions for men and women, its relation to social and historical process. The focus of this last section will be on the video work of Lynn Hershman.